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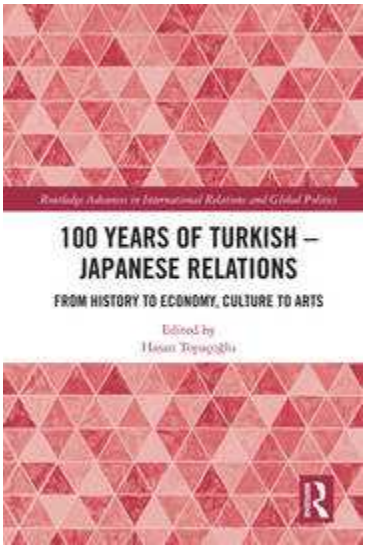

Reading 100 Years of Turkish-Japanese Relations (Routledge, 2025): A Hard Shell That Doesn't Quite Hold Up Once Cracked

INTRO

Having read dozens of Japan-related bilateral history monographs and having myself written an interdisciplinary monograph on the early history of Japan–Hungary relations (1869–1913), one naturally develops a practical benchmark for works of this kind (called: "anniversary publishing"): a minimum of around 200 pages of substantive content paired with a robust scholarly apparatus of at least 200 references. This book meets those quantitative thresholds. However, by attempting to cover a full century of relations, it feels significantly overstretched and fragmented. A more effective approach would have been to split the material into two sharper, more focused volumes – one dedicated to the Ottoman–Japanese and early Republican periods, and another to the post-1950s era. The broad canvas inevitably results in thin coverage and prevents any deep assessment of individual phases. As an edited collection, its analytical value is further limited compared to methodologically and structurally coherent, scientifically grounded monographs that strive for objectivity. With 62% of the contributors active in

Turkish academia, the volume inevitably reflects the prevailing conditions of scholarly production in Türkiye today. Ottoman–Japanese and Turkish–Japanese relations constitute a fascinating case study precisely because they are not inherently bound to a single ideology. Yet, in the current Turkish academic climate, these relations are often instrumentalised: certain narratives are clearly amplified because they serve contemporary political and ideological objectives, while more nuanced or critical perspectives are marginalised. Having observed similar dynamics in other contexts with constrained academic environments, the reviewer finds the overall tone of the volume overly sanitised and celebratory. The introduction reveals that the volume was commissioned and compiled in a strikingly short period – just two years. This is barely enough time to properly collect and digest the necessary sources, let alone produce a genuinely reflective work. Unsurprisingly, about 1/4 of the texts contain almost no discussion of methodology and offer no self-reflexivity regarding the contributors' potential biases or their stance on objectivity. Although the editor claims that the book fills 'a notable gap' by providing 'a comprehensive, comparative, and interdisciplinary examination of Turkish–Japanese relations' (p. 2), it does so only questionably. Instead of delivering a consolidated, rigorous synthesis, the volume offers only scattered spotlights on assorted issues, with quality varying haphazardly. Ironically, the book's greatest weakness lies precisely in what the editor praises most: its presentation of "various issues" on "a wide range of topics" (p. 3). The result is a loosely connected collection of essays rather than the substantial, gap-filling work promised.

Chapter 1

Selçuk Esenbel, long regarded as the doyenne of Turkish-Japanese relations history, has her contribution praised in the introduction as a "deeply insightful, masterful exploration of a century of Turkish-Japanese relations" (p. 3). Such an assessment is difficult to sustain upon actually reading the chapter. Delivering a genuinely deep and insightful analysis of a full century of bilateral relations in merely twenty pages is simply unrealistic. –

The chapter contains no discussion of methodology and displays no self-reflexivity regarding the author's position as a Turkish Japanologist. This omission amounts to a significant epistemological blind spot. Esenbel uncritically repeats textbook Nihonjinron tropes, such as referring to "the culturally and linguistically homogeneous Japanese population" during the Meiji era (p. 14) – a statement that raises serious doubts about the critical depth expected from a leading scholar in the field.

Her treatment of key historical episodes remains superficial. Important topics – such as the resonance of the 1905 Russo-Japanese War in the Ottoman and broader Muslim

worlds, the Japanese study of the Ottoman consular system in Egypt, and Japan's unsuccessful attempt in 1894 to secure unequal treaty privileges from the Ottoman Empire – are mentioned only in passing. Equally underdeveloped is the potentially rich story of Japanese intelligence activities in Istanbul under the protection of the Ottoman Palace. What could have been a compelling case study of pragmatic, behind-the-scenes cooperation is reduced to a brief aside.

Instead of critical analysis, the chapter repeatedly emphasises romantic and emotional narratives. Esenbel writes of a "romantic discourse that has lasted over a century" and "emotional connections" that have fostered "special trust" between Turks and Japanese (p. 21). She devotes a full page to Japanese visitors' poetic and essayistic impressions of late Ottoman Istanbul (published in the 1911 volume *Illustrated Observations of Turkey*), framing them as "geopoetics," yet offers no critical examination of this Pan-Asianist romanticisation.

The overall approach is positivistic and evasive: a chronological listing of events and notable figures that skilfully avoids potentially sensitive political, cultural, or comparative questions. There is little mention of the multi-ethnic character of Ottoman diplomacy (including non-Turkish and non-Muslim actors), the instrumentalisation of the Ertuğrul narrative, or the broader geopolitical context involving Britain and Russia.

Selçuk Esenbel does mention several episodes that complicated or challenged Turkish-Japanese relations in the 1920s and 1930s, yet she fails to analyse any of them in meaningful depth. Among the most significant is Japan's sponsorship of Pan-Turanism and Pan-Islamism, including the establishment of the Japanese Pan-Turan Association in the 1930s. This activity directly contradicted and alarmed Kemalist Turkey's carefully balanced foreign policy, but the chapter reduces these complex and geopolitically charged developments to brief, passing remarks.

Such a turbulent and multifaceted history – stretching from late Ottoman times through the early Republican period – demands careful methodological treatment and a clear historiographical framework. Instead, the chapter feels fragmented, uneven, and at times incomprehensible to readers who are not already well-versed in Ottoman and Turkish history. Promising and intellectually rich episodes are raised only to be skimmed over in one or two sentences, without placing them in a broader, accessible context or exploring their wider implications.

A particularly striking omission concerns the role of non-Turkic actors. While Esenbel mentions the Tatar community's involvement in Turkish-Japanese relations, she remains completely silent on other groups. Most notably, there is no reference to the hundreds of Ottoman Armenian refugees who fled through Siberia to Japan. The absence of any mention of Diana Apcar – a remarkable figure whose life connects the collapsing

Ottoman Empire, the Armenian diaspora, and Japan – is especially conspicuous in a work that claims to cover a century of relations.

At times, the chapter even slips into sub-scientific territory, such as when Esenbel uncritically repeats assertions about “the Altaic linguistic roots of Japanese” (p. 33), a highly contested and largely outdated hypothesis presented without proper critical qualification.

In short, the chapter reads as a celebratory overview rather than the rigorous, critical, and epistemologically self-aware contribution one would expect from a scholar of Esenbel’s stature. It exemplifies the very limitations the volume as a whole struggles to overcome.

Chapter 2

Erdal Küçükyalçın’s chapter stands out as the most engaging and readable contribution in the volume. Focusing on Count Ōtani Kōzui and his role in the early, underexplored phase of Turkish-Japanese relations, the author begins with the Ertuğrul martyrdom monument in Kushimoto and the addition of the so-called “Kōzui inscription” in 1929. The essay presents interesting details on travel history and bilateral contacts that could usefully be developed in future research. Küçükyalçın tells the story smoothly and with evident enthusiasm, making it one of the few chapters that genuinely draws the reader in.

Count Ōtani Kōzui is undoubtedly a fascinating figure. However, the chapter offers a somewhat one-sided portrait. While it rightly highlights his initiatives – including investments in Turkey and his role in founding the Japan-Turkey Foreign Trade Association, of which he became chairman – it elegantly omits the more controversial aspects of his career. These include serious financial scandals and embezzlement allegations that led to his resignation as Abbot of Nishi Hongan-ji, his lavish lifestyle, and his deep involvement in Pan-Asianist ideology, which envisioned Asia united under Japanese leadership. His expeditions to Central Asia also attracted prolonged suspicion from British and Russian intelligence due to their ambiguous mix of religious, academic, and political-imperial motives.

The chapter’s lighthearted, story-oriented approach, while enjoyable, lacks the critical historiographical depth one might expect. It does not seriously engage with the Pan-Asianist motivations that likely underpinned Ōtani’s interest in Turkey, nor does it offer counterarguments to the sub-scientific linguistic claims regarding Altaic roots (p. 50) that appear in the text. As with much of the volume, a more rigorous, balanced, and objective analysis is missing.

Nevertheless, within its limits, Küçükyalçın's contribution delivers an accessible and engaging narrative. For many readers, the convenient omissions will likely go unnoticed.

Chapter 3

Ryosuke Ono's chapter, supported by a JSPS Kakenhi grant, is a well-written work of diplomatic history centered on Uchida Sadatsuchi, who was sent to Istanbul in 1921 as Japan's first representative to Turkey. Ono examines both Uchida's role and the relationship between his Japanese and Turkish contemporaries and the broader currents of Pan-Asianist and Pan-Turanian thought. The chapter draws on British, Japanese, and Turkish sources, while also incorporating responses from contemporary Turkish newspapers. Historiographically, this is the strongest contribution in the volume: methodologically grounded, clearly focused, and based on a genuinely multinational source base.

CHAPTER 4

Sinan Levent's chapter attempts to cover 150 years of Turkish–Japanese relations, beginning with the first Japanese visit to the Ottoman Empire in 1870. The problem is that more than a century of diplomatic history is compressed into barely eleven pages, producing a text with little analytical depth, no clear methodology, and no defined research objective. In this sense, the chapter reflects the generally weak structure of the volume as a whole. The chapter's main merit is its use of Japanese-language sources, which help foreground the Japanese side of the relationship. Beyond that, however, it remains a dry and highly conventional diplomatic history. At points, the pacing becomes absurdly rushed: Levent jumps from the mid-1920s to the late 2010s in only a few sentences, bypassing decades without meaningful discussion. The latter sections read less like scholarship and more like diplomatic boilerplate, filled with vague phrases about "unprecedented political cooperation" (p. 90) and relations being "closer than ever before." As a Hungarian living under Orbán's electoral autocracy, I found a few passages particularly troubling because of its complete lack of critical distance. Levent writes that "the Organization of Turkic States expanded its geographic and cultural scope in 2018 by accepting Hungary, an Eastern European nation and member of the European Union, as an observer state" (p. 91). Presented without qualification or analysis, this raises serious questions about the author's epistemological stance and his willingness to critically interrogate the political-ideological narratives he reproduces. It is not surprising that Levent also uncritically reproduces claims about Hungary's supposed "historical and linguistic ties to the Ural-Altaic language family" and identification with the "Turanian people" (p. 91), which is nothing but pseudoscientific nonsense: the Ural–Altaic theory has long been discredited, while Turanism belongs to nationalist mythology rather than serious scholarship. It is astonishing that Routledge's editors

allowed such claims to pass unchallenged. Overall, this chapter is among the weakest contributions in the volume.

CHAPTER 5

Aysun Uyar Makibayashi's chapter examines policy responses to recent global environmental changes. While this is not my area of expertise, the chapter nonetheless demonstrates how environmental policy can serve as a productive field of comparison in bilateral history studies. It offers some of the book's first pointed criticisms of Turkey, highlighting its limited and unstable participation in regional and global environmental regimes, as well as its broader environmental negligence. These criticisms stand out in a volume that otherwise tends to remain cautious in its evaluative tone, making this chapter one of its more timely and substantive contributions. More broadly, the chapter suggests a useful framework for comparative analysis in bilateral relations history that could also be applied to other cases. It is also notable that some of the stronger contributions come from scholars outside Turkey, such as Makibayashi, a professor at Doshisha University in Japan.

CHAPTER 6

Bahadır Pehlivantürk's chapter addresses Turkish foreign policy toward East Asia. It is particularly noteworthy for its explicit engagement with methodology—an element that is largely absent from a quarter of the contributions in the volume. In this regard, the author's self-reflective observation that "In an interregional and intercultural country such as Turkey, the multi-causality at all of these levels of analysis can make it especially difficult to identify a coherent set of parameters" (p. 114) is especially welcome. The chapter is also well structured, with a clear logical progression and useful categorisation into digestible sections. It includes a measured critique of Turkey's "semi-authoritarian undertone" in its domestic political structure, though this characterization arguably understates the complexity and severity of the issue. Overall, the chapter stands out as a strong example of good scholarly practice and a solid contribution to the volume. Its broader regional focus – addressing East Asia rather than limiting itself to Japan alone – is also a valuable strength. However, it would benefit from more explicit positioning within the context of Japan's own foreign policy framework.

CHAPTER 7

K. Ali Akkemik's chapter provides an analysis of economic relations, supported by extensive statistics and tables. It is another solid contribution to the volume, grounded in data and observable trends rather than purely descriptive discussion.

CHAPTER 8

Tolga Özsen's chapter offers a brief comparative analysis of the Japanese and Turkish educational systems. Supported by tables and statistical data, it provides a concise but useful contribution to the volume.

CHAPTER 9

Oğuz Baykara's chapter examines Turkish literature in Japan between 1925 and 2024 from a translation studies perspective. A notable feature of the study is its attention to paratexts – such as prefaces, afterwords written by translators, and even visual elements of book publications – accompanying Japanese translations of Turkish literature. The author also explicitly engages with research methodology, which strengthens the academic framing of the chapter. In total, the study identifies 52 book-format works related to Turkish literature in Japanese translation. The discussion is necessarily brief, as the author notes that a more detailed treatment will be developed in a separate publication. The approach is promising and could be productively applied to other bilateral history contexts. However, the qualitative analysis itself remains rather limited and somewhat superficial. Despite this, the underlying research design is valuable and merits further development, as it could be adapted for broader comparative work in bilateral relations studies. Importantly, such research also has potential applied value, as its findings could inform cultural diplomacy and country image policy, a point the author also gestures toward in the conclusion.

CHAPTER 10

Mutlu Binark's chapter examines the admiration of Japanese popular culture products in Türkiye. Research on anime, manga, J-pop, and the broader cultural influence of Japan has become increasingly prominent both in public discourse and in recent academic work, to the point that it is now often treated as an indispensable component of analyses of bilateral relations. At the same time, however, the overall quality of much of this scholarship remains disappointingly low, despite the fact that such studies now constitute a significant portion of Japan-related research worldwide.

Compared with many similar works, Binark's study is relatively well-structured and occasionally succeeds in introducing a degree of analytical contrast and comparative value, particularly through the inclusion of Hallyu, the Korean Wave, in the discussion. One of the more interesting aspects of the chapter is its treatment of commemorative stamps as instruments of cultural diplomacy. In this context, the author briefly analyses

the special commemorative stamp issued by the Turkish Post to mark the centenary of Türkiye–Japan relations.

Nevertheless, the chapter's engagement with broader theoretical questions – especially orientalism, self-orientalism, and related conceptual issues – remains superficial. These themes are acknowledged, but only at a surface level, without sustained critical analysis.

CHAPTER 11

Minako Mizuno Yamanlar's chapter largely consists of a catalogue of Turkish art exhibitions held in Japan. Beyond this descriptive listing, the chapter provides only a very brief and rather superficial contextualisation, amounting to roughly four pages. As a result, its analytical contribution remains extremely limited, if not altogether absent. Given its predominantly descriptive nature, the material might have been more appropriately included as an appendix or reference list at the end of the volume rather than presented as a standalone academic chapter.

CHAPTER 12

Ezra-Gökçe Şahin's chapter was perhaps the most promising contribution in the volume based on its title alone, as it appeared to move beyond the orientalist notions of "likeness" and "mutual admiration" that so often dominate discussions of Turkish–Japanese intercultural relations. The author examines the process of image-making between Türkiye and Japan through the method of frame analysis, and the chapter is both carefully constructed and well written. Given Şahin's anthropological background and Harvard training, the overall quality of the contribution is hardly surprising. Positioned near the end of the volume, the chapter largely succeeds in dispelling the disappointment left by some of the book's earlier sections.

Şahin skillfully guides the reader through the complex terrain of mutual misunderstanding and misrepresentation that has shaped Turkish–Japanese intercultural relations. One of the chapter's central insights is that both Japan and Türkiye have historically been subjected to the orientalist gaze of the West, a condition that has profoundly influenced the ways in which they perceive one another.

The chapter stands out stylistically as well. It is lively, vivid, and engaging, enriched by anecdotes and personal experiences in a way that sharply contrasts with the more rigid and formulaic tone of the rest of the volume. In fact, its distinctiveness is so striking that one may even wonder how such a dynamic piece found its way into a collection that is otherwise not particularly strong stylistically. Particularly commendable is the author's sense of objectivity and intellectual independence. At certain points, the chapter even

provocatively challenges prevailing tendencies within Turkish academia, a quality that reflects genuine scholarly integrity and is both refreshing and necessary.

At the same time, the contribution is not without shortcomings. Despite its strengths, the analysis occasionally remains intellectually shallow, especially in its treatment of the deeper meta-meanings behind certain narratives and discourses, which could have been explored more rigorously. There is also a disproportionate emphasis on the role of the West in shaping Japanese perceptions of Türkiye and Turkish people, while comparatively no attention is paid to the agency of Turks themselves in constructing and projecting their own image within Japan.

Even the strongest chapter in the volume is not entirely free from editorial problems. For example, the misspelling “Chino-Japanese War” (p. 239) is particularly jarring – not only because it escaped editorial correction, but also because of how unusual and awkward the formulation appears. Nevertheless, despite these flaws, Şahin’s contribution remains one of the book’s most compelling and intellectually stimulating chapters.

SUMMARY

This book is both a welcome addition and a disappointment. While it marks an important milestone in the study of Turkish–Japanese relations, a quarter of the volume ultimately fails to deliver rigorous scholarship; these pieces read more like polished official commemorative texts than serious scholarly contributions – uneven in quality, padded rather than purposeful, and disappointingly shallow in analysis. Other contributions (especially from the second half of the book) offer high-quality insights that are not limited to the narrow Japan–Türkiye relationship, but also merit consideration for application and replication in other Japan-related bilateral relations research projects. Unfortunately, some of the chapters remain descriptive, offering little fresh interpretation or critical insight.

At €190 for a hardback, the price is not merely high – it is indefensible. It demands a significant financial commitment from libraries and readers while delivering content that could comfortably fit into a strong special issue of a journal. One feels short-changed not only financially but intellectually. These shortcomings cannot be attributed solely to editorial decisions. As I mentioned earlier, they also reflect the difficult conditions under which much of Turkish academia currently operates: heavy political and ideological pressure, restricted intellectual freedom, and an environment in which conformity too often prevails over critical inquiry. In such circumstances, this volume may well represent the practical ceiling of what is achievable today in Turkish historiography. Readers and future researchers interested in Turkish-Japanese ties may extract some

useful references and basic information from it, but they would be far better served by consulting scattered journal articles, primary sources, and stronger individual studies. One can only hope that, in a freer intellectual climate, the next significant anniversary of this relation will be commemorated with scholarship of genuine depth and originality.

Among all of Japan's bilateral relationships, Ottoman/Turkish-Japanese relations between the 1860s and the 1930s stand out as perhaps the most complex, ambivalent, and intellectually challenging. Handled with rigour and courage, this history could become one of the most valuable contributions to the broader historiography of Japan's international relations. However, this would require a clear vision, robust methodology, genuine inclusivity, academic freedom and deeply knowledgeable scholars operating at the top of their craft.

This volume possesses only a fraction of these qualities. The attempt feels doomed from the outset. Two years of preparation was simply insufficient, especially for a loosely coordinated collection of essays in which contributors appear to have pursued whatever topics and approaches they wished. A scattered set of chapters on random themes with varying internal structures is probably the least suitable format for unpacking such a difficult and multi-layered relationship.

It is a pity that this particularly hard-to-crack chapter in Japan's global engagements has received such mediocre treatment, missing many opportunities to produce a robust, interdisciplinary, coherent, much-needed critical, and illuminating work of history.